

Teach a Man to Fish ...

It wasn't the government that helped more than 900 Gush Katif refugees find work, but JobKatif, a volunteer organization headed by Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Rimon, a yeshivah rebbe from Gush Etzion

By David Shamah

As a rebbe in a Gush Etzion yeshivah and the author of a number of *sefarim*, job counseling was the last thing Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Rimon imagined he'd get involved in. But not only did he get involved, he received a special award from President Shimon Peres for his efforts in helping Gush Katif refugees find work.

"We started small, and somehow the whole thing snowballed into a major effort," Rabbi Rimon told *Hamodia*. "So far, *baruch Hashem*, our organization JobKatif has helped over 900 people find new jobs or businesses — in many cases not only giving them a respectable way to earn money, but saving their marriages and families as well."

For many, losing a job is a major personal crisis, tantamount to losing their identity. But for Gush Katif expellees, sudden unemployment was just one of dozens of major crises they had to deal with. Losing their homes and communities — basically being set adrift, severed from every mooring in their lives — was more pressure than they could bear.

"In such circumstances, finding a job might not seem like a priority, but after becoming familiar with the situation, it became clear to me that getting resettled in a new career was just the therapy many of these people needed," said Rabbi Rimon. "Many of the problems that resulted from the disengagement — tensions between spouses and the disillusionment of children, with many families cracking under the stress — were at least partly the result of the loss of status of the breadwinner and his marginalization. Getting back on their feet, economically and in terms of career, has helped many of them to salvage and rebuild what they had lost in their family lives."

Rabbi Rimon's involvement began shortly after the disengagement, when he led a group from his hometown of Alon Shvut to Jerusalem, to visit refugees who had been put up in hotels throughout the city. "After visiting a few times, it became clear that many of the refugees felt they had lost their purpose in life because they had nothing productive to do."

He realized that the best way to help the refugees was to help them find new work. "But I, as a yeshivah rebbe, knew almost nothing about how to find a job," he said. Networking, resume writing and interviewing for a job were skills he had never thought to develop.

But Rabbi Rimon did have one natural talent — he knew how to organize a project. And so, he called on a small group of talented friends and neighbors who did know a thing or two about how to find a job. "From there the whole thing mushroomed, until today we, *baruch Hashem*, have 150 people helping — all volunteers," he said. JobKatif quickly built up a network of employers and succeeded in getting hundreds of referrals for jobs, while working with the job-seekers to help them polish their skills.

But finding jobs for many of



Rabbi Rimon receiving the President's Volunteer Award from President Shimon Peres: "After visiting the Gush Katif refugees a few times, it became clear that many felt they had lost their purpose in life because they had nothing productive to do."

the refugees proved to be a challenge. Most of them had been employed in a limited number of industries — mostly in agriculture or as public-sector workers, such as teachers, secretaries or administrators [in the Gush Katif Regional Council]. And, of course, there were those who had run a gamut of small businesses.

For many of the former farmers — about 80 percent — agriculture was no longer an option. "Many of the farmers were older and felt burned out — unwilling to get involved in long-term projects like rebuilding a fruit, flower or vegetable export business, since many had already lost their markets. Besides, the government has offered little land for the refugees, despite all the talk of how it is helping the farmers — and almost none of it was in the area where the refugees were living." As far as the former local council workers were concerned, they found that budget cuts had left them with no government-funded jobs elsewhere.

"Many of the job-training programs the government enrolled the refugees in proved to be useless — for example, a group of refugees took a tour-guide course, but none were able to get a job because they don't work on Shabbos," Rabbi Rimon explained. Other problems — depression, inadequate skills and lack of preparation — plagued many of the refugees, he added.

"So we realized that we needed a more comprehensive approach, one that would take into account everyone's needs as much as possible," Rabbi Rimon said.

Counselors worked with each person on an individual basis, with a focus on pinpointing his talents and abilities. "It really was the only approach," he said. "These people have gone through much more than any of us can imagine, and their mental state was very important to helping them get into a new profession."

After much effort — and millions of shekels, much of which

was raised by Rabbi Rimon in the United States — JobKatif has managed to get 900 working adults, out of about 1,600, back on the job.

"A few were able to find positions in areas they had worked in before, but most are working in new careers," he said. "We worked with each person to find the right fit."

It didn't always go smoothly. Some had to try a few different jobs or careers to find what they needed, with a good number of the older refugees opting for their own businesses. In fact, says Rabbi Rimon, those who have gone through JobKatif's program do better at business than most; while the general success rate for small businesses in their first year is only about half, 94 percent of JobKatif graduates who open their own business remain open — and profitable — after a year.

"It's clear that we help them, but a number like this only comes through a great deal of *siyatta diShmaya*, for which we are very grateful," he said.

As a result of these efforts, Gush Katif refugees are now employed in a wide variety of businesses and professions that many never imagined they would be working in. "For example, one former farmer who realized he would not be able to continue working in agriculture, switched from flowers to fish. He now works in fish farming — aquaculture — and is earning a good income, *baruch Hashem*." Another refugee now makes ice cream, and a third is in scrap metal and aluminum production.

"In some cases, we helped people utilize skills they hadn't used in years, such as the man who opened a bicycle repair shop in Yad Binjamin, having learned how to fix bikes when he was a teenager."

Many of the jobs and businesses the refugees now find themselves working in may seem surprising to those who knew them in their previous professions, "but

they really aren't surprising to the people doing the jobs. To them, finding themselves in their new profession is more like a revelation, since they were always interested in doing these things," Rabbi Rimon says.

JobKatif's greatest challenge is finding jobs for older workers — which in Israel means 50-plus. "It's very difficult for people in this age group to get any job at all, and if you're not highly motivated, your chances of landing anything are slim," he says.

While some in this group were able to successfully open businesses, others were unable to — and Rabbi Rimon wracked his brain trying to figure out how to help the over-50s.

The solution came to him when he met with an elderly aunt of his living in England. This woman, in her 90s, was gainfully employed — in telemarketing. "I said to myself, 'Why not have the older people in Gush Katif do this as well?' Older people have the patience to handle telemarketing, while younger people don't — and I discovered that older people often do very well at telemarketing." And so was born a new career for about 25 former Gush Katif residents in the over-50 set — who do telemarketing for a well-respected Israeli weekly.

"It's a good start," says Rabbi Rimon, "but we still have 750 people out of work, many of them over 50. Getting them started in new careers is going to be the hardest thing we've done yet, and is going to cost far more than the work we've already done."

JobKatif has raised tens of millions of shekels, and it needs more. "I have been to the United States for fund-raising several times, and now we are beginning a high-gear fund-raising effort in Israel, as well," says Rabbi Rimon, adding that JobKatif is the most effective — and just about the only — organization working in the field right now with Gush Katif refugees.

"Right after the disengagement there were many organizations working to distribute food and assistance, but many disappeared after awhile. As far as I know, JobKatif is the most active organization working with refugees," Rabbi Rimon says. "So donors can be assured that their money is well spent."

And the need for money now is acute — especially since JobKatif gets no help from the government. "As word spread of the work we did, I got a lot of calls from Knesset members and politicians. I was even promised money, with the government offering to match the money we raised. But so far, no money has been forthcoming," Rabbi Rimon says.

It's not that his efforts are being ignored; witness his receipt in July of the President's Award for Volunteerism.

"Receiving the President's Award for Volunteerism is a great honor and privilege that encourages us immensely," he says. "But we do not want those who are still unemployed to feel, G-d forbid, like we have arrived at the end and are satisfied. I am happy that we have succeeded in helping so many people return to work, but there are 750 people who are still unemployed. I pray that Hashem will give us the strength to succeed in helping them."

"Recently a story happened to us that you could only call a *nes*," he says, describing how he was able to help a young man build not only a career, but a family.

"I got a call from a 27-year-old man we had worked with, who told me he had good news and bad news," recounts Rabbi Rimon. "He told me he was getting married, but didn't have a shekel to his name." No money for furniture, appliances — or a wedding.

He asked Rabbi Rimon to help him, telling him how desperate he was. "I told him we would do what we could, but that we just didn't have the resources to fund a wedding."

But then something strange happened. "A few hours later, I got a call from someone who told me he wanted to donate — a wedding hall!" The donor, it seems, had signed a contract for a hall for his son's wedding, but decided to go with a larger venue. Having committed to the first hall, he was reluctant to demand his money back. "Instead, he decided to donate it — and of course, I offered it to the young man I had spoken to earlier, who was ecstatic to have a wedding hall that could handle 300 guests."

In fact, the donor was so happy he was able to help, he even paid for a band for the young man's wedding!

"That incident told me two things," said Rabbi Rimon. "One, that Hashem is with us — such a story is clearly a *nes*. And two, that there are still many desperate people among the Gush Katif refugees. I feel privileged to be able to help them in whatever way I can."

Readers who wish to help JobKatif in its work or who want more information, can call the organization (in Israel) at 072-212-7125, or e-mail jobkatif@012.net.il